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ABSTRACT

Designed to develop competency-based adult education (CBAE) as an alternative adult education delivery system, the Illinois CBAE Project provided a series of three workshops and a consultation for 48 Illinois adult education practitioners. The workshops consisted of an awareness workshop, a module development workshop, and an evaluation and sharing workshop. During the workshops, participants designed competency-based modules for adults that were later implemented into local curriculums. The CBAE training project was judged to be highly successful for a variety of reasons, including the following: the voluntary nature of the project, the criterion-based selection process used to screen participants, support given to the project by local program administration, and a training model that allowed participants choices and allowed a period of time for reflection. While most people connected with the project were pleased with its outcomes, some commented on time pressures felt during the project, different levels of readiness among participants, and a discrepency over the definition and specificity of terms. Recommendations included calls for similar projects and reassessment of formulas for dispersing funds to encourage adult education programs to incorporate CBAE into their existing programs. (MN)

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The Illinois CBAE Project: A Voluntary Alternative for Implementing Competency-Based Adult Education

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Competency-based education (CBE) has been one of the most widely discussed issues in adult education since the 1975 release of the Adult Performance Level Study by Northcutt. While educators have been debating the pros and cons of CBE, the twin movements of accountability and back-to-basics have motivated 35 state educational agencies to formally adopt a form of CBE. Discussions within the adult education community indicate that competency-based adult education (CBAE) is an extremely complex issue that means different things to different educators and which will continue in the future to be a controversial and stimulating issue.

Because of the magnitude of the implications of CBAE, because of the state educational agency's past involvement in competency-based projects, and because of the high level of practitioner interest in the concept, the Illinois Office of Education (IOE) sponsored a teacher training project with the main thrust of developing practitioner competency in CBAE as an alternative adult education delivery system. The project is currently in its second year. The prime goal during the first year of this staff development project was to train 60 practitioners in the process of integrating CBAE into their regular and already existing Adult Basic Education (ABE)/General Educational Development (GED) program.

Training for this project was conducted through a series of workshops and on-site consultations. In order for the

project to succeed, the project designers assumed that:

1. Participation by practitioners must be voluntary.
2. The scope of the project must be limited to training a core group of interested practitioners.
3. Participants must be willing to commit themselves to 36 hours of professional development and to implementing the methods, curriculum, and processes used in CBAE.
4. The up-front pledge of administrative support in developing and implementing CBAE was a prerequisite.
5. The process and outcomes had to be flexible and adaptable to indigenous local situations.

The Illinois CBAE special teaching-training project was proposed by Northern Illinois University (NIU) and was funded under Section 306 (a) (4) of the Federal Adult Education Act. NIU administers the grant and provides a research base for technical assistance to the project. IOE shared in the selection of the project director and cooperates in the supervision of that person. In addition, the project director is housed within the state educational office in order to increase the director's credibility and to overtly confirm to practitioners IOE's commitment to CBAE.

During the first year, the project was divided into three phases -- Awareness, Training, and Implementation. In the awareness phase, information concerning the CBAE project was disseminated on a state wide basis to acquaint adult educators within the project. A letter signed by the state director of adult education was sent to all administrators of ABE/GED programs which announced the project and

encouraged participation. To raise additional interest in CBAE, the project director conducted several local and regional workshops throughout the state.

Next, letters and surveys were mailed directly to administrators and teachers in federally funded programs in the state. In addition to briefly describing the project, this letter asked those who were interested in participating in the project to commit themselves to 36 hours of training and to commit their program to a willingness to implement CBAE.

The project design allowed for sixty participants. However, one hundred and fifty-five teachers, counselors, curriculum specialists, and administrators responded to the survey and expressed a desire to participate. Therefore, participant selection criteria used for selection were based upon employment in a federally-funded program, a commitment to training and implementation of CBAE in the local program, and administrative support.

Input concerning the potential participants was gathered by the project director from IOE regional representatives, IOE central office staff, and Regional Service Center personnel. Recommendations were then made to the state director for the final selection of participants.

Next, a letter, which was signed by the state superintendent of education, was sent to the administrators of the local programs which contained the candidates recommended as

participants. The administrators were asked to endorse the selected candidates and to affirm their support for the implementation of CBAE. In addition, the letter invited the administrators to participate in the first workshop.

The final step in the awareness and selection process was informing the participants of their selection. From their announcement letter, the participants learned of their selection, were provided more information about the format of the first workshop and the project, and were reassured that they would have the opportunity of implementing the instructional strategy most appropriate for their own teaching style and situation.

As a result of this selection process, 55 adult education practitioners made a commitment to participate in the project and were endorsed by their administrators. Because of workshop rescheduling due to bad weather, 48 actually participated in the first workshop.

The training phase of the project involved three workshops and consultation. The workshops consisted of an Awareness Workshop, a Module Development Workshop, and an Evaluation and Sharing Workshop. The anticipated outcomes for this phase of the project were that the participants would:

1. learn about CBAE.
2. identify an area of interest.
3. design a competency-based module for adults that could be completed in 1 to 4 hours by students or staff members.

4. implement the module by integrating it into the regular instructional, administrative, or support service aspects of the existing ABE/GED program.

The first workshop in the training phase of the project spanned two days and involved 18 hours of training. Prior to the workshop, three mailings were forwarded to the participants which included an Adult Performance Level (APL) summary, articles on CBE/APL, excerpts from CBE/APL curriculum guides, and descriptions of CBE/APL special projects. The first day of the workshop expanded upon these orientation materials and was devoted to providing an overview of CBAE, to examining the anticipated outcomes of the project and workshops, and to orienting the participants to the six specialized content areas of life skills in which the CBAE process could be applied. These orientation sessions were conducted in small groups and dealt with Occupational Knowledge, Government and Law, Goals and Decision Making, Interpersonal Relations, instructional APL materials from the Illinois' Urbana Project, and the Illinois Department of Corrections curricular model for CBAE. Each of these content area sessions was conducted by an experienced CBAE consultant from a local program within Illinois. In addition to conducting these sessions, each consultant was later responsible for training the participants who selected his/her content area and eventually for the on-site observation of those participants.

The second day of the workshop involved the participants

in the actual development of a module using the basic CBAE components of Purpose → Outcomes → Evaluation → Instructional Strategies → Resources. For this task, the participants met in small groups within one large room. After the leader of the general session described and defined each component of this model, each small group developed an actual CBAE learning module. After each stage in the process, the groups shared their curricular results and discussed the problems which they had encountered and the concerns which they had related to defining and developing CBAE modules.

By the end of the first workshop, the participants had become familiar with the materials, curricula, and various instructional approaches used to implement CBAE. They had experienced developing a CBAE module. In addition, they had been oriented to six specialized content areas of life skills and had been asked to decide upon their own specific area of concentration for CBAE curricular development and implementation.

However, the participants were not yet prepared to implement a specific module. As they had been cautioned, they had been provided just enough information to give them a general knowledge of CBAE and to produce frustration. A three week period between workshops had intentionally been included in the project design. This period allowed the participants ample time to privately reflect upon the first workshop and to internalize its proceedings. The

anxiety caused by the first workshop coupled with an adequate reflection period resulted in a deeper involvement and more rapid participation by the practitioners in the second workshop. As a result of this reflection stage, 47 of the original 48 participants returned for the second workshop; and they were psychologically prepared for action!

The second two day workshop involved 18 hours of training with an emphasis on the selected content areas. The goal of this workshop was for each participant to develop a CBAE module that could be completed in from one to four hours. General sessions were held to develop group cohesiveness, to work on communication skills, to model group activities suitable for classroom use, to plan personal outcomes expected from the workshop, to examine various instructional strategies, and to explore curriculum guides, materials, and resources. However, the salient portion of this workshop was the small group sessions in the selected content areas. Here the participants met with "their" consultants and actually developed a CBAE module to meet their own indigenous needs. Each participant left this workshop with five duplicated CBE curriculum guides, a bibliography of commercial materials available in the content area, and a CBAE module suitable for immediate implementation in his/her existing local program.

The third and final one day workshop allowed the participants to share their experiences and outcomes in implementing a CBAE module, to evaluate the training process, and to project

the needs for future training. The participants informally shared the modules that they had developed and evaluated them by means of criteria defined by the project director. The projects were then submitted to the director as outcomes of the project activities.

The modules were implemented into the local curriculums by the practitioners during the period between the second and third workshops. During this stage, the content area consultants and project director visited the local programs to provide additional support and guidance in implementation. In addition, IOE's staff was constantly available to assist the practitioners.

Main Factors Contributing To The Success of the Project

The CBAE training project has been judged a success by IOE, NIU, the project director, and the participants. The following factors significantly contributed to the project's success:

1. The project was voluntary. Only those interested in CBAE became involved in the project. Thus, the consultants were able to concentrate on familiarizing the participants with CBAE approaches and teaching strategies rather than on "selling" CBAE. This voluntary approach also reflects IOE's philosophy of encouraging local autonomy in program planning while simultaneously providing staff development activities and increasing practitioner awareness of alternative educational delivery systems.

2. The process of selection was efficient and criteria-based. By screening the applicants

through criteria directly related to the success of the project and by gathering input on the applicants from several sources, only those candidates who were sincerely committed participated in the project. As a result of this selection process almost 50 practitioners from 35 different programs participated in the project, and there was no significant drop-out between the workshops.

3. Participants were asked to make a commitment. Before participating, each participant had to commit himself/herself to 36 hours of training and to a willingness to integrate a CBAE module into his/her ongoing local program.

4. The project sought and secured the support of the local program administration prior to the training sessions. Local administrators were made aware of CBAE and its potentialities. Their support was openly solicited, and they were invited to participate in the project. As a result, administrators from 35 programs pledged to support their teachers in the implementation of CBAE in the regular program, and 15 administrators attended the first workshop to expand their awareness and knowledge of CBAE.

5. The participants experienced the process about which they were learning. The training sessions were developed according to the CBAE component model. The consultants had identified the purposes, outcomes, and instructional strategies for the workshops, and the participants were informed of the criteria for the project's evaluation. Thus, CBAE provided both the generic model and the content for the workshop.

6. The participants were allowed choices. Each participant was allowed to select the CBAE approach and instructional strategies most appropriate for his/her local situation, the specific content area for developing module, and the degree to which his/her present program would be modified by the integration of CBAE.

7. The training model allotted a period of time for reflection. The first workshop whetted the practitioners' appetite for CBAE but did not provide them with enough information to begin

implementation. This created frustration which stimulated reflection on CBAE, fostered internalization of the CBAE process, and encouraged further participation in the project.

8. The training sessions were contingent upon each other and collectively led to clozure on the CBAE process. The general orientation session laid the conceptual foundation for CBAE and introduced the various CBAE approaches. The small group sampling sessions familiarized the participants with the various content areas and instructional strategies, and they prepared the participants for selecting a content area. The small group sessions for module development flowed logically as the next step. Finally, the modules that were prepared were suitable for immediate implementation in the individualistic situations of the various practitioners.

9. IOE supported and was involved in the project. The state educational agency overtly demonstrated support for the integration of CBAE into the existing local programs by funding the project, by housing the project director, by involving and eliciting the support of local administrators, by the support of the state director, by involving IOE staff in the planning and screening process, and by encouraging IOE staff member attendance at the training sessions. Despite this support, participation remained voluntary.

10. The project was flexible. Input was solicited from the participants by means of surveys and evaluations. These results and the needs voiced by the participants during the workshops were taken into consideration to constantly adjust the project to most efficiently meet the participants' needs.

Shortcomings of Project

During the course of the project, some participants expressed the following concerns:

1. Some were uncomfortable with the anxiety created by the first workshop. While the frustration and reflection period was considered a project strength by most participants and the consultants, a few participants desired immediate clozure on

CBAE and its implementation. This lack of initial clozure caused them a feeling of insecurity.

2. Some felt pressured by the time. The majority of the participants came to the second workshop goal oriented. They desired to spend the total time for the workshop in small groups with the consultant in the actual development of their module.

3. Participants had different levels of readiness. Some sought to implement the CBAE approach immediately after the first workshop while a few others were still seeking clarification of the projects goals, purposes, and outcomes after the second workshop.

4. A discrepancy developed over the definition and specificity of terms. This developed because of the diversity within CBAE and because each consultant had his/her own definition of and viewpoints on CBAE. This problem was solved by allowing each group and consultant to define the terms in the most appropriate manner for providing clarity to CBAE in that content area.

Implications and Recommendations

Competency-based adult education and the results of the Illinois CBAE project have several implications for teacher training and for state educational agencies. This CBAE project provided an opportunity for local ABE teachers to address the current trend in education of back-to-basics by incorporating competency-based education into their ongoing adult basic education programs. The modules for this project stressed the development of the basics of reading, calculating, and writing while focusing on the content of realistic and needed survival skills. The successful experiences of the practitioners in this Illinois project clearly demonstrates that ABE teachers can respond

to the cry of back-to-basics by utilizing competency-based education in their ongoing program.

Another implication relates to a concern voiced by local school district personnel and by state legislators. They clearly emphasize that the day of mandated programs is past. In Illinois the state educational agency, specifically the adult and continuing education section, resisted attempts to move to a mandated competency-based adult education program. Rather than mandating CBAE, the state educational agency cultivated interest at the local level, and as a result the practitioners volunteered to participate in the project. Rather than subjecting the adult education programs within the state to sweeping changes, the state educational agency sought to stimulate interest in an experiment with CBAE. Once again, the voluntary nature of the program proved to be much better than an imposed statewide mandate.

As with any special demonstration project, the state educational agency must lend its visible support to the project. By working cooperatively with the post-secondary institution and by housing the director of the CBAE project in the state office, the state educational agency was able to show overt support for the project and for the concept of competency-based education. If this had not been the case and if the director had been located on the campus of the post-secondary institution, then the crucial element of the project director's access to the local programs would have been severely hindered.

During the last several years, state governments have shown a concerted attempt to decrease the number of state employees. This movement has involved state educational agencies as well as other state agencies. If the state educational agency is to prevent this trend from reducing or stifling the expansion of services to local adult education programs, it must begin to "broker" out its services through local educational agencies and post-secondary institutions.

State educational agencies must also increase their involvement with post-secondary institutions relative to the awarding and conducting of special demonstration projects. This expansion should seriously consider the public community college systems that exist in most states. If the current trend continues for adult education activities to be transferred from the responsibility of the common school district to the community college district, more and more community college districts must be considered for planning grants, special demonstration projects, and other funding administered through the state educational agency.

Simultaneously, the adult education departments of the state educational agencies must begin to recognize the latitude and opportunity they have in funding demonstration projects. In the past, the diversity and number of 306 (a) (4) projects could have been greatly expanded. Likewise, the 309 area of the current amendments to the Federal Adult Education Act must be looked at creatively and innovatively.

As the state educational agencies prepare their policies, procedures, and priorities for dispersing 309 funds, they must stress and reexamine the "research" section of the act.

The design of the Illinois CBAE project incorporates two principles important to any special demonstration project. First, there must be an up-front commitment to the project by the local administration in order to insure the successful participation of teachers and the implementation of the products of the project. Second, most special demonstration projects in adult education cannot guarantee success during the first year of operation. Hence, many will be multi-year projects which may involve follow-up and onsight consultation during the ensuing years of the project.

Recently many states have either moved or are considering moving to the certification of adult educators. The involvement of an adult educator in a competency-based program may have ramifications for the certification of that educator. Therefore, as states begin to develop certification criteria for adult educators, they must consider the impact of the competency-based education trend on existing adult education programs.

As more and more local adult education programs either voluntarily or involuntarily incorporate competency-based education, state educational agencies must reassess their formulas for dispersing state and/or federal adult education funds. Revisions in the funding formulas can serve as an

obvious incentive to encourage local adult education programs to incorporate competency-based education, or drastic changes may force the local programs to adopt CBAE. Although the Illinois project lends strong support for the voluntary approach, the pervasiveness of the CBAE movement dictates that funding in the future address adult functional competencies and consider the accountability of programs in successfully identifying the competencies to be mastered by the adult student.

Summary

In Illinois the state educational agency assumed a major role in orienting local practitioners to the process, strategies, and models of competency-based adult education. However, rather than mandating the implementation of CBAE, the state educational agency encouraged practitioners to examine CBAE and consider it as a method for augmenting their existing ABE/GED curriculums. In addition, the practitioners were allowed to decide for themselves the degree to which they would modify their present curriculums by integrating CBAE. To train local practitioners in the CBAE process, the state educational agency conducted a series of staff development workshops. To finance the project, the state educational agency creatively interpreted the 306 (a) (4) section of the Federal Adult Education Act. The Illinois CBAE Project has several important implications for adult education practitioners, the competency-based adult education

movement, and state educational agencies. Therefore, the assumptions, design, and findings of this project should be carefully scrutinized by those in the field as they seek to define, evaluate, and implement the complex concept of competency-based adult education.